



It ain't easy being green

City looking for overhaul of recycling program

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Environmentally sound but not so economically prudent, the feel-good practice of recycling is coming under scrutiny in Carson City and elsewhere as municipalities start paying more attention to the ever-growing price tag.

"I notice a lot of cities are just trashing their recycling programs," City Supervisor Shelly Aldean said Thursday.

Far from the simple practice of collecting cans and turning them in for cash, a real recycling program requires drive time, manpower and equipment to collect cans, bottles and papers for the local trash-hauling company Capital Sanitation.

Capital Sanitation eventually gets paid for the recyclables, but not enough to make it profitable. There's not much of a market for recycled materials, since raw goods cut from the forest or dug straight out of the ground are cheaper for manufacturers.

To help fund the program, the garbage company also charges \$1 a month for those who sign up. It's not nearly enough either, but, Capital Sanitation Manager William Field said it wouldn't be right to charge people an arm and a leg when they're just trying to do the right thing.

Still, Capital Sanitation isn't a city department. It's a private business.

Under its contract with the city, Capital Sanitation is supposed to make a "fair" rate of return for the services it provides.

The city helps make up for the shortfall by subsidizing the company with \$850,000 a year. Even that's not enough, according to Greg Martinelli, an official of Capital Sanitation's parent company, Waste Management.

With revenue from customers and money from the city, recycling is generating about a 4 percent profit here.

According to Martinelli, the average profit for similar programs across the country is about 11 percent. Capital Sanitation is looking for something like 8 percent.

City supervisors on Thursday balked at a request from the company to add \$280,000 to this year's subsidy, which Capital Sanitation argues has stayed the same for years while the cost of doing business has gone up.

"I'm having a real problem with that one," Mayor Marv Teixeira told Martinelli and city supervisors.

There isn't much about the recycling program that makes sense for the city, financially.

With the amount of trash recycled in Carson City, officials estimate it would take 40 years to save enough space to add one extra year to the landfill's life span. At \$850,000 a year, that would be \$34 million - too much, the city says, for one extra year of dumping.

The selling point of most recycling programs, however, is usually about saving trees and oil rather than dump land.

"There's more to recycling than landfill space," said Field. And if it's about making money, "you're not going to have any (recycling)," he added.

Teixeira said Friday he knows recycling an important idea to many Carson City residents, but at some point, it is about money.

"It's just that, can we do it more economically?" he asked.

As a city with more than 40,000 people, Carson City is mandated by state law to have a recycling program, but it's not necessarily mandated to have curbside recycling.

One of the ideas mentioned to supervisors is quashing the curbside pickup and building drop-off stations where people can bring their recyclables. Recycling advocates, however, say drop-off systems result in lower participation.

Another idea, City Manager Linda Ritter said Friday, would be to reduce the number of pickups from two to one per month. Combining profits from trash removal program and the recycling program might even reveal the two together make an acceptable profit, she said, adding that there are a lot of ideas to consider.

"It's about finding what the cost-benefit ratio is that we are willing to live with."

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